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ABSTRACT

The transition of the Czech school system from a centralized system to one where schools enjoy greater autonomy has not been smooth. Educators and administrators need to learn new skills in interacting with parents, community, and each other in an educational system that is becoming more decentralized. Several surveys were conducted to characterize this transition. This report describes new and problematic developments in the Czech educational system, such as the formation of school boards and boards of governors. School boards, meant to represent local communities, parents, and educators, appear to be too far from schools, too slow to react, and unable to play an important role in the system. Boards of governors, intended to evaluate school activity, develop the school's contact with the community, and defend the interests of the pupils, lack support from central, regional, and local governing bodies, which have adopted a "let's wait and see what happens" attitude. Communication problems need to be resolved at all levels of the educational system; accountability procedures need to be established at all levels; and trust needs to be established between parents and school personnel. Autonomous school development, only recently started in the Czech Republic, needs constant attention to take root. (Contains 11 references.) (RT)

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Autonomous school development: a challenge for everyone involved.

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The development of the Czech school system in the 1990s brought a chance for greater autonomy of schools. This has been accompanied with new demands on both external and internal life and behaviour of schools. Two aspects of school external relations (school governing bodies' set up process, and the development of school/family relations) will be more closely examined in this paper; additionally, some attention will also be paid to internal schools' development and teachers' participation at the school management in particular. These aspects are closely related with the reality of autonomous school development. The paper is based on several surveys conducted by authors in recent years in Czech basic schools.

„External" [1] life of schools:

One of the consequences of political and social changes taking place in the Czech Republic after 1989 has been an effort to develop a new and effective system of school governance. While until 1989 schools were closely and strongly tied to the central bodies controlling and determinating a large deal of their work, recent years have been dominated by the tendency to set up a system in which schools will become an open and organic part of their local environment. A centralist way of governing schools is gradually being transformed into a new system of school governance in which local community is to play an important role. Boards of governors can be seen as the main element of a newly emerging school governance system in the Czech Republic (Pol, 1995).

There can be identified three phases of the development of the local school governance system:

1. November 1989 - September 1993

A period of intensive public discussions and efforts to find a way how to change a centralist system. As a main result of this period there appeared:

* a set up of local educational authorities (intended to serve as a liasion between schools and the government)
* an introduction of the self-governing bodies (set up of school commissions operating on several levels: from the central level [Parliament] to the local one)
* rather clear distinction of three mutually independent streams of the education system's management: the Czech school inspection, the state bureaucracy, and the self-governance.

In this phase school boards (built on the level of school district) appeared as a new phenomenon in the system. They were meant to represent local communities, parents, and

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educators. The boards had power to discuss with the LEA development and performance of schools within the district, and also to influence hiring of the heads of the schools concerned. School boards appeared to be, however, too far from the schools, too slow to react, and unable to play an important role in the system.

Boards of governors did not get into the legislation of the period concerned. At few schools bodies resembling them were set up, though - mostly as a result of the parents' initiative.

2. *September 1993-Spring 1996.*

On September 1, 1993 the Ministry of Education recommended each primary, secondary and special school to set up a board of governors on an experimental basis. The Ministry directive defined the role and composition of the boards of governors in the following terms (MŠMT ČR, 1993):

- The board of governors is an independent body, with a role to play in supervision, counselling and information. The boards has a co-ordinating function as regards the school's relations with parents, prospective employers of pupils and the community. The purpose of the board is to defend the interests of pupils.

- The board of governors evaluates the school's activity, especially in the area of education itself. It helps the head to develop the school's contacts with parents, the community and other partners.

- Establishment of the board of governors is initiated by the head. Whether or not board adopts a constituion is for the parents and other interested parties to decide.

- The board of governors consists of:

** elected representatives of parents and (in the case of secondary schools) of pupils;*

** delegated representatives of the local community, of employers' organisations, and of other interested parties;*

** representatives of the school.*

Each of these groups has roughly one-third of the places on the board, unless some other distributions is agreed upon.

- The board of governors elects from its members a chairman, who manages the board's activities, negotiates with the school inspectorate and other bodies, and is mandated to act on behalf of the school.

- The board of governors gives its opinion on the following matters:

** the educational achievements of the school;*

** the solving of pedagogical problems;*

** the efficiency of the teaching process;*

** the curriculum;*

** the number of pupils;*

** the school finances;*

** staffing matters;*

* *work plans.*

- *The board of governors approves the annual report of the school.*

- *The board co-operates closely with the school head but can question his decisions.*

The material mentioned was accepted with criticism by school politicians as well as schools, parents, and other interested parties. A low level of clarity of the material, and a totally noncommital nature of it for boards of governors worried school leaders most of all.

Moreover, there was totally lacking the support for the boards of governors set up from relevant bodies at all the levels (central, regional, as well as local). „Let's wait and see what will happen" could be called the prevailing attitude of initiators.

According to the data available, during first 18 months of the experiment about 150 boards of governors were set up at basic schools, and another 20 boards at secondary schools. In general, it was about 1,5-2% of the total number of these schools. It seemed, the boards of governors were not attractive enough for almost anyone (Pol, Rabušicová, 1996).

3. *Spring 1996 - until now*

The legislative initiative (the amendment of the School Act No. 564/1990) moved the whole process further on, at least on the level of legislation. There is no more discussion about the experiment. Boards of governors are to be gradually set up (in case of interest of the parties concerned - parents, students, local governments, etc.) at every school. They should be composed of 5-16 members, the school head cannot be a member. Members are elected (or nominated) for the 2-year period. In case of state and church schools, 1/3 of members is nominated by the founder of a school, 1/3 is elected by parents or/and students who are major of age, and 1/3 is elected by the school employees. In case of private schools, there are slight modifications.

As for the competencies, the board of governors:

* approves an annual school report, an annual budget proposal, and an annual financial report

* gives its opinion on curriculum, school development plans, hiring and firing of the school head

* can suggest to the founder of the school a revocation of the school head

* can invite the Czech school inspection, the LEA, and/or other relevant bodies to control the economy of the school, and some other aspects of the school's activity.

Initiators of the latest legislative action (which intends to anchor boards of governors firmly into the education system) expect a growth of interest in school governing bodies set up among the parties concerned. According to the indications available, this can appear to be, however, a wrong expectation, at least for the nearest future.

It seems, there is a general concensus of all the involved about the very idea of boards of governors. They are viewed as a vital and viable way for the development of the school local governance system. Many people connect boards' activity with some positive hopes and

expectations. In practice, these parties act, however, like as they are not interested in an immediate entry of the boards into the educational scene. There seems to be a low level of belief in the practical benefit of such an action.

What are the main features of the position and contribution of ther parties involved in the process of boards of governors set up?

The Ministry of Education:

* delegated through the LEAs on school heads the responsibility to inform parents, students, and other parties involved about the possibility to set up a board of governors at their school;

* has not provided neither LEAs, nor the schools with any other materials and resources to support the setting up process. It seems, such materials have not simply been developed and they are not available to people at the Ministry either. As a result, there are no effective guidelines for actions leading to the set up of boards of governors at the moment.

Neither the Ministry, nor the LEAs managed to persuade many school leaders about the necessity and benefit of boards of governors' set up.

Founder of the school:

According to the legislation, the boards of governors can be set up out of the initiative of the founder of the school. This is in case of the state basic school the local government. The opinion prevails that in the period of „early capitalism" the section of education is often one of the most neglected and most poorly casted within the local governments staffs' composition. Moreover, schools claim that local governments are often not very much interested in boards of governors' set up, unless they view the boards as a tool for controlling (or rather dominating) the school, „a place which is able to swallow any amount of money, if it is not kept under the strict control", as one of the local government's officials expressed. In their minority, there can also be found examples of an opposite kind, though.

Schools:

Schools themselves, their leaders in particular appear to be in a rather controversial position concerning the boards of governors. On the one hand, they expect from boards the support in many respects. According to them, boards of governors could:

- help to make a firmer position of a school in the local community
- help to develop richer school's external relations
- support the school's strive for its greater openess
- become a source of the feedback for a school

- help a school in conflict resolutions

- enable a school to cooperate with the public in the development of essential materials (school development plans, setting school's priorities, etc.)

- help to improve the material basis of a school

- help to develop extracurricular programs of a school

- help to improve parents' involvement in a school

- improve information process and concequently avoid conflicts caused by a lack of information.

School leaders:

On the other hand, school leaders (as well as other people involved) often feel uncertained with an absence of the experience with the school governing bodies in traditionally centralized Czech education system. Furthermore, in recent years school leaders often have seemed to be very busy with performing their very much new roles of leaders and managers of their rarther autonomous schools (they often try to cover all the fields, from economy personnel, to building maitanance, etc.). The governing bodies can easily create a new situation and bring new demands which school heads may not feel to be happy with at this particular period. As a result, school leaders:

* may not feel a need for the set up of governing body (moreover, operating without their formal participation);

* may even feel threatened by the board of governors' activity (by „incompetent interventions of non-professionals");

* may feel a low interest of parents and members of other groups which are meant to be represented in the boards.

Schools as well as some parents often expressed their criticism concerning the discrepancy between power and responsibility given to the boards of governors by a new legislation. They also worry about the boards' possible activity and influence on the schools. Concerns about the possibility to control the operation of the boards have often been articulated, too.

Parents:

Parents' role in the process concerned does not seem to be without problems either. There are many discrepancies in the very process of school/family relations development and it has its influence on the gioverning bodies' set up. In our recent research (Rabusicova, Pol, 1995), we have found the level of communication and collaboration between the school and the family as not very satisfactory one. The premise about a communication barrier existing between the school and the family was not disproved by our findings. There are also indications of the parents' interests to set up better contacts with the school. Less evidence

about the efforts was found at the parents' side, though.We have also found out, though, that schools are trying to change the situation, although they are not always successful in their efforts. At the same time, schools often seem to perceive the extent of their openess to external public as a rather large and satisfactory one, which does not always correspond with the reality (Pol, Rabušicová, 1996a).

To a certain extent there have been altered the reasons spotlighting the dissatisfaction in school/family communication and collaboration. Among the main obstacles are outstaying, subjective and often not very positive judgements of the school (family) about the other institution. These can hardly be removed easily and quickly. There are also some objective factors influencing the current level of school/family relations. They characterize the era after 1989. One of the main factors is a difficult economic situation of both schools, and many families which consumes too much of their attention, time, and energy. Consequently, there is a shortage of possibilities of getting involved in other activities (a collaboration with the family, resp. the school including). The school/family relations' development would be also helped by an establishment of a more appropriate legal framework. Finally, the schools are not supported sufficiently in their efforts to build effective external relations by the LEA (methodically, morally, financially), and other education service agencies.

There does exist an awareness of the need of collaboration with parents at the current Czech basic schools. There is also a lot of effort and many individual initiatives at these schools and also on the side of parents in this field. Their effectiveness is often not very high, though. It seems that currently the schools experience the phase of their gradual opening up and careful seeking for ways which would lead them more closely towards the parents. The latter, on the other hand, often seem to be still taking their "time off" after decades of an obligatory participation on the ideologized work of the school. Both sides, though, feel they would need to get more closely to each other - in the benefit of the pupil.

It seems therefore most relevant that although parents' power has increased in recent years, their interest in school matters has been decreasing at the same time. In many cases they can hardly be seen as a reliable force in the process of the very set up of boards of governors. Moreover, the PTAs or/and individual interactions of parents and schools seem to be sufficient enough forms of contact with the school for many parents. As a result, they cannot really see the point of boards of govenors' set up (once they reflect solely and directly their one's own and their child's benefit).

In general, a situation of affairs described can hardly be considered as a satisfactory one. Although generally approved by all as an essential element of a new and desirable system of the local school governance, boards of governors have not received yet any real support from any of the parties involved. It seems, the relaxed attitude continues to take place. The input (information, guidelines, training offers, etc.) from the administration of the education system would be of the highest and most urgent importance and priority. During 8 years after the 1989 „Velvet Revolution" the Czech society has undergone many changes. This also concerns the education system (a changing position of schools, their relations to external environment, etc., etc.). With regard to all the main changes and tendencies, we consider an effort to set up boards of governors as the one started in an adequate time period. Again, the problem we can see, is that this start has not been acccompanied with the launch of relevant and efficient support at all the levels of the system. This is, we believe, a main reason of current situation with boards of governors in the Czech Republic.

„Internal" life of schools:

Although operating in rather decentralized and democratized system, schools' inner life itself might be featured with latent possibilities even to autocracy (position of the heads is rather strong). Does the democracy stop in front of the schools' gates then? In our latest survey (Pol, Rabusicova, 1997) we have been concerned with some aspects of participative style of management and its implementation in the Czech basic schools. The data of the survey are still being processed. At the moment we can only offer first, and still only very brief and rough look at the situation in Czech schools. It seems, there is a good deal of wish among teachers as well as school heads to function jointly in somenthing like cooperative, even participative millieu. In theory there seems to be a willingness to behave in a way supporting such a millieu. Yet the reality of structure and culture of schools are major obstacles for implementing more efficient forms and norms of participation and collaboration. Some other factors (such as empowered heads, starting threat of unemployment among teachers, low teachers' wages, generally felt lack of resources, low connection of evaluation of teachers' performance and participation, etc.) play their role in this issue, too. It seems evident, though, that long-term development of a „good school" is associated with joint effort and collaboration of all the people involved in the school. Participation within the school seems to be another challenge for everyone involved.

Conclusion

Autonomous school development is the process which has recently only started in Czech Republic. It seems to be quite clear that it will need a constant attention, support, daily work on all the different levels of education and wider social systems. Czech schools and people in them and around them are facing the challenge which will have to be tackled in order not to convert the school autonomy concept into an empty political slogan.

[1] We are well aware that to divide school's life on „external" and „internal" as done above can often be found rather problematic, and that there are many penetrations and interrelated phenomena between the two „lifes" concerned.

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